Presence of Absence

by
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Some personal thoughts on history, culture, and the role of writers and women in Communist and post-Communist Central Europe

"In a certain sense I can consider myself a typical Eastern European," writes the Polish-American writer Czeslaw Milosz in his autobiography Native Realm. He continues,

> It seems to be true that his differentia specifica can be boiled down to a lack of form—both inner and outer. [The Eastern European's] good qualities—intellectual avidity, fervor in discussion, a sense of irony, freshness of feeling, spatial (or geographical) fantasy—derive from a basic weakness: he always remains an adolescent, governed by a sudden ebb or flow of inner chaos. Form is achieved in stable societies. My own case is enough to verify how much of an effort it takes to absorb contradictory traditions, norms, and an overabundance of impressions, and to put them into some kind of order. Modern civilization, it is said, creates uniform boredom and destroys individuality. If so, then this is one sickness I had been spared. (67)

I've read this chapter many times and always found Milosz's characterization of "a typical Eastern European" unacceptable in a "certain sense." This paradoxical "certain sense" gives plenty of ambiguities if we are to understand anyone's cultural identity as typical. Milosz's fascinating figure challenges many other Eastern Europeans who also claim to be typical. It is not so easy to have such good qualities as "intellectual avidity, fervor in discussion, a sense of irony, freshness of feeling, spatial (or geographical) fantasy." Even what Milosz attributes to the darker side of the Eastern European character seems attractive. He speaks of one who "always remains an adolescent governed by sudden ebb or flow of inner chaos," and yet it sounds so psychologically attractive that this ambiguous life yields an irresistible, literary portrait.

One simply loves this typical Eastern European from the book. He sounds so complex. And yet Milosz, like the other famous Eastern European writers, including Kundera, Hrabal, Havel, Skvorecky, Michnick, Klima, and Konrad, writes from the male's point of view and for the male's point of view. Is it possible for "a typical Eastern European" to be a woman? What is the difference?

But first, let's take up some other questions. Where was Eastern Europe in the past, and where is it today? Are Eastern and Central Europe the same?

The expressions Eastern Europe, Mitteleuropa, Central Europe, and Mitropa suggest that there are a number of differently shaped patches of Europe that can be called central or eastern. Historians, geographers, politicians, and writers search for Central Europe in the frontier between Western and Eastern Europe, in the frontier between Germans and Latins, in the belt between the Baltic territories up north and the Balkans in the south of Europe. The Slav area with Poles, Czechs, Slovaks, Slovenians, Croatians, and Serbians; the Germanic area with Germans and Austrians; the Magyar-Finnish area with Hungarians, Finns, and Estonians; and finally the Jews who are widespread all over these areas—all of these create the traditional map of Central or Eastern Europe, even though one might question the term, for what is eastern and what is central in Europe? And does not the question of direction also become a question of politics, culture, or geography?

The ancient traces of a Central European area began with a Germanic colonization in a feudal time where a German-speaking aristocracy was dominant. A non-German-speaking middle class awoke in the 19th century through the waves of national movements, and German-Jewish-Slav-Hungarian, ethnically mixed nations formed a multinational, multilingual, multi-religious Central Europe.

The four main competitors for control in Central Europe were the Ottoman Turkish Empire from the 14th to the 18th centuries, the Hapsburg Empire until its fall in 1918, the German Imperial aspirations from Bismark in

the 1870s to Hitler, and the various Russian Empires of Czarism, Stalinism, and the Warsaw Pact after 1948.

The Austrian writer Robert Musil writes of the lack of values in the most powerful state in the beginning of the 20th century, the Austro-Hungarian Empire:

> The Austro-Hungarian Empire was a rich collection of particularisms which, with no doubt, could afford to the spirit useful traveling, but one should keep in his mind that this Empire had nothing to do with a synthesis of one state. This state hasn't had a clear concept, nor a creative will of one nation for it was not established as a free association of many nations which could build up its back-bone animating a matter of its blood. (273)

The frontiers of Central European states had been painfully reshaped after World War I and World War II. In 1918 the new state of Yugoslavia appeared in the Balkans. The South Slavs, Muslim Slavs, and many other ethnic groups became a little Central Europe after the Austro-Hungarian Empire disappeared. But Musil's definition of a "state without synthesis, a clear concept and a free association of many nations" found its confirmation and poor political prognosis in the case of Yugoslavia.

I was born in the early fifties in the town of Gracac, south Croatia, a republic of the former Yugoslavia. Soon after my birth, my parents moved with my older sister Olga and me, to the city of Bjelovar, where we lived ten years before we moved to Zagreb, the Croatian capital, where my father got a job as a bureaucrat in the Republic's Office of Internal Affairs.

My mother stopped her work as an accountant soon after I was born and took on the traditional role of a wife and mother who volunteered for the Red Cross. If I were to choose the most valuable gift I received from my parents, it would be their lesson that people should not be judged according to stereotypes.

In the early sixties, the time in which I formed a conscious understanding of life's more substantial values, the traces of World War II were still fresh and painful. Under communism we were reminded every day of our glorious victory over the Nazis and of how that victory had provided a mainstream for bringing together all nations and peoples in a country with so many languages, religions, nationalities, histories, and cultural origins. I was around ten years old when I read the book Across the Atlantic to the Partisans in which one chapter was dedicated to my grandfather, Emil Vrkljan, my mother's father. He had emigrated to Canada in the late twentieth century in the hope of earning some money and bringing his family to Canada or going back to Croatia to provide a better life for his wife and daughter. At home we had a few of his golden sepia-tone photographs; I especially liked the one that was taken just after he had joined a big orchestra, where he stood with a contrabass at the edge of the picture. He was young and joyful and in his early thirties. His shy smile covered the hard life he had lived. In 1943 he decided to join a group of about three hundred Croatians who were already Canadian citizens but who were sailing to Europe to join the Partisan Resistance Movement against the Nazis in Croatia. A German submarine torpedoed the ship, and my grandfather was not among those who survived. I had been taught to think with pride of how my grandfather gave his life for our freedom, but today I know that expressions of pride have many levels of unexpressed love.

My mother's loss seemed to be almost unbearable. Two of her uncles were killed in 1943 and 1945 by the Serbian nationalists—the Chetniks. She would always say, however, that the deaths of her beloved father and uncles did not mean that all Germans or Serbians were bad. Though I was not spared from the wounds of nationalism, I was spared from an upbringing of nationalistic hatred. In our neighborhood lived a Serbian couple, and I often played with their children. One day we were arguing about something and one of the boys yelled at me furiously, "You are a Croatian fascist bastard!"— as if to target the Croatian Ustasha of World War II. Later on, I gained good Serbian friends, but ever since Serbia attacked Croatia in July of 1991, I have heard nothing from any of them.

I was around fifteen years old when I started to travel in Europe with my sister Olga. The first time I experienced the magic embrace of nature and human imagination in architecture, art, and fashion was in the vivid streets of Venice, where I realized how slight had been my awareness of the similar historic beauty of the many Croatian cities that spread inland all along the Adriatic coast. Cities such as Dubrovnik, Split, Pula, Zadar, Osijek, and Vukovar have lost their Romanesque, Gothic, and Baroque radiance under a Communist government that didn't consider it important to take serious care to preserve what it called "old, decadent nests," even though the politicians had moved into beautiful villas after proclaiming their former owners the enemies of the people and the state. Since the early sixties, the new urban areas in all Eastern European countries were scenes of destruction brought on by the ugly, gigantic, concrete buildings with thousands of small cage-like apartments, dirty entrances, broken front doors, and trash spread all around the streets. To many people, a sense of communal property simply meant that someone else was responsible for its care. This was, in a certain way, a mirror image of the behavior of most of the politicians, who saw the state apparatus as their property but not their responsibility.

The socialist architecture served as a visualization for my resistance against communism forever. I have lived for years in one of these small, cage-like apartments, calling it Less than One, named after Joseph Brodsky's book Less than One. Actually I should have been happy having that Less than One, for there have been so many young people with Less than Zero. One who regards architecture as the sign of spiritual identity condemns the Communist era first for its total neglect of a historic code of the development of civilization. Communism behaved as if nothing had happened before it and nothing would happen after it. This exclusivity appears in every dictatorial society, and the lack of an environmental conscience is one of the first visible signs of what the philosopher Martin Heidegger calls the historical break between human existence and world, for man is part of the world, and his existence produces the quality of the world and vice versa.

Does it sound too paradoxical if I say that despite all of these circum-

stances and despite the heart ailment that I suffered from for years, in a certain sense I had a happy childhood and youth? Books, films, friendships, studies, loves, travels, writing, painting, and holidays on the Croatian part of the Adriatic Sea–all these particles slowly filled out a ground of form and self-awareness despite any repressive political power. This is the way people who live in dictatorial societies manage to turn skepticism into irony, rage into creativity, and chaos into hope.

In 1980 I got a job at Radio Zagreb's education program. At the time I had published three books and presented two art exhibits, so I expected to work on programs concerned with literature and art. I got a broadcast assignment on "How to bring Marxism closer to students," which was really more than I could have expected. I went with a tape recorder to one high school asking students what they thought about Marxist teachings. After the editor-in-chief heard the broadcast I almost lost the job. In a while I was politely asked to join the Communist Party, but I innocently said that I suffered from heart disease and Communists, who smoke so much while having long meetings, probably would suffocate me. It was the easiest way to mask myself with the irony of passive dissent. Many Croatian writers and journalists did the same. Those who were more courageous had been imprisoned.

A few reasons prompted me to get fresh air in the early 1980's in Berlin and Munich and later on in the United States: the feeling that life was somewhere else, the narrow scope of what was permissible in my job as a journalist, the notorious supervision by male leaders, chiefs, and ideologists, and the experience of witnessing helplessly while growing Serbian nationalism repressed the people in Kosovo. In the nineties, the Serbian repression and censorship that had been imposed on Kosovo's Albanian Muslim population in south Serbia during the 1980's spread all over Yugoslavia.

In the summer of 1991, I was in Berlin when Serbia attacked Croatia. I was hysterical on the telephone to my parents and my sister in Zagreb and watched as TV showed the first victims shot down by Serbian aircraft in the streets of the city of Borovo. The camera focused its eye on the dead women's bodies lying in the street, and I started to cry and call for help.

In all communist countries, men shaped the government into a mirror of their male culture's view of women that accentuated whatever was aggressive, possessive, and patriarchal.

Is that the first fact according to which I can consider myself a "Typical Eastern European" woman? During my marriage I was working at least five jobs. While I was making a living as a journalist, I kept our household by cooking, cleaning, doing laundry, and shopping, without any help from my husband. In the evenings I was writing, and during holidays I was painting and reading. Finally, I had open-heart surgery and I divorced my husband. At the same time I divorced Communism too.

The famous male Eastern European writers whom I have named in the beginning of this article have used the novel to describe the absurdity and brutality of Communism, the absence of freedom of artistic expression, and—finally—women. The first two subjects have brilliantly conveyed the captive mind of totalitarianism, but the third subject—women—has appeared as the weakest, for women have been portrayed as weak, spoiled, and intellectually inferior characters. Even when these novelists write about love between men and women, they cannot avoid the chaotic confusion of their patriarchal-urban male superiority. The man, even when he bears certain negative characteristics, sustains the dignity of his gender in the narrator's eyed.

Here is an example of how Milan Kundera tries to transform his machoism into the "appreciation of the self" in his novels:

> As I was writing The Unbearable Lightness of Being, I realized that the code of this or that character is made up of certain words. For Tereza: body, soul, vertigo, weakness, idyll, Paradise. For Thomas: lightness, weight. . . . Her [Tereza's] entire life was a mere continuation of her mother's . . . and [she] suffers from it. She has small breasts with areolae that are very large, very dark circles around her nipples [as if they were] painted by a primitivist of poor-man's pornography. That information is indispensable because her body is another of Tereza's main themes. By

> contrast, where Tomas, her husband, is concerned, I tell nothing about his childhood, nothing about his father, his mother, his family. And his body, as well as his face, remains completely unknown to us because the essence of his existential problem is rooted in other themes. (34;35)

But the conclusion suggests that Kundera's male characters are generally dealing with "existential problems" by "grasping the essence" from them, while his female characters are generally dealing with "existential problems" by "suffering from vertigo, which is the intoxication of the weak."

The image of woman as poor sexual target and victim finds its confirmation and its terrible shape in the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The degradation of women and the male assertion of sexual power over women have been the principal tactics of the Serbian Orthodox fighters against Muslim women. The campaign of rape, torture, and killing has been a part of a total genocide and ethnic cleansing, which strive to make the ethnically clean Serbian areas in the Croatian and Bosnian regions that will be links to Serbia

The fact that the President of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in 1991, the prominent Serbian writer Dobrica Cosic, has been one of the intellectual architects of both the Greater Serbia and the genocide and ethnic cleansing plan in Bosnia and Herzegovina casts a terrible shadow over the conscience and profession of a writer. And what shall I say about the Serbian poet who is a leader of one of the most brutal Serbian nationalistic Chetnik groups, who said in an interview with the journalist William Pfaff that he wished "to bring about a new general war in Europe from which Serbia can emerge at last—a spiritually purified victor and great power"?

In its constant struggles, Central Europe has romanticized the Western European countries as potential liberators from Communist totalitarianism. But neither in politics nor in culture has Western Europe ever shown a real engagement in the Eastern European twilight zone. The dissident writers who emigrated to the West struggled with the unbearable problems of cultural adaptation and confronted the cynical smugness of the western democracies rather than their real concern and political support for the rebels against communism.

Though they emigrated, others stayed. Writers like Havel, Gotovac, and Kosik, who have been catalysts of the national conscience and resistance to totalitarianism, struggled for freedom and democracy in Central Europe from the inside, from prisons. Their political novels and essays made visible the invisible life of terror.

In 1988 Vaclav Havel wrote in prison a book of political essays that included "The Case of Totality." Here it is:

> A friend of mine, one hard asthmatic, had been sentenced as a political convict to many years in prison. He suffered terribly in there, for the other convicts in the cell smoked so much that he couldn't breathe. All his requests to be moved into a non-smoking cell failed. His health, and his life actually, had been seriously jeopardized. One American woman who heard about the case, and who wanted to help, gave a telephone call to her friend, the editor of one well known American newspaper, asking him to write about the case. The editor answered: "Call me back when the man dies." (247)

This is indeed one shocking example but from a certain point of view, a reasonable example: the newspaper needed "the story." Asthma isn't the story. "Only death can make the story," said Havel.

But I am not sure if that is even true. The United Nations issued a report in November 1992 on violations in Bosnia that spoke of "massive and systematic Serbian violation in Bosnia and Croatia, ethnic cleansing, shelling of civilian areas, extra-judicial detention, torture, and disappearances of detainees." For two years now the Western allies have searched for a political solution.

In 1993, Central Europe is once again at the cultural, political, and economic margin of Western Europe. But out of Communism and scattered in many new-old countries, this decentralized region seeks first of all for stability and form, which might be called the possibility of making political, cultural, and economic choices.

What kind of choices do women have in this still shaky Central Europe? Not too many. Although they are still divided among at least five jobs, they are far away from any political and cultural influence and power. Their needs and rights are still stored in plays, essays, and novels written by rare Eastern European women writers.

This is probably the only "certain sense" in which I can think of myself as "a typical Eastern European"—as a **woman.**

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